TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Robert Adamson, *Net Needle* (Flood Editions, 2015)

Robert Adamson is arguably Australia's chief poet. He has at least twenty collections of poetry to his name and has won several major literary prizes for his work. At the time of writing this review he is on tour in the United States, giving readings at the Poetry Center in San Francisco and at other venues in other cities, including Chicago where *Net Needle*, his most recent collection of poetry, was published by Flood Editions (the Australian edition is published by Black Inc.).

What do you expect when you pick up a collection of Adamson's poems? Birds, the river, poems dedicated to other poets; poems that depict experiences of being incarcerated as a younger man and of becoming a poet, falling in love with language. In this regard, *Net Needle* does not disappoint. It delivers what the reader already expects and many of the poems have appeared elsewhere. However, this collection represents a different and deliberate arrangement of poems and, in this regard, it has an essence of its own.

Don't try to interpret or understand the poems on a first reading. Enjoy the language; absorb the feeling; enjoy the flights of imagination. Envisage the poet as hawk, his 'connection to sky' (89) and recognise him as a keen observer of nature and purveyor of spiritual dimension wrought through language. Even allow yourself to become one with the hawk and the feeling of a poem, but do not attempt to swoop on meaning prematurely, to swallow the stalked prey of singular sense. Come back to the poems again and again and allow them to breathe and deepen as you step into the scenery and begin to weigh the words on your own scales of experience. In a review of *The Kingfisher's Soul* (Bloodaxe, 2009), Jonathan Shaw commented that, 'When he read at Sappho's recently, Adamson remarked in passing that he generally doesn't know what his poems are about until he's finished writing them, and often not even then.'[1] So perhaps it doesn't matter at all what the poems mean or what they are about. Just let the language and imagery wash over you as you read and enjoy.

Let us think about *Net Needle* as a title and as an overarching metaphor. Net needles are used by fishermen to make or mend nets; to stitch together. They are generally carved by hand and take a fair amount of patience to complete. Net making is a craft, as is writing poetry, and the net makers, as Adamson tells us in the poem of that title, 'wove everything they knew / into the mesh, along with the love they had, / or had lost, or maybe not needed' (15). They are also described as having an 'inner tongue', which holds the thread in place. Doesn't the poet also have an inner tongue? The image of a net needle appears on the Flood Editions cover. It is a photograph taken by Adamson's partner, photographer Juno Gemes, to whom the book is dedicated: 'heart's needle, soul's compass'. There is also an illustration of a net needle at intervals throughout the book and with each repetition of the image the net needle is in a different position, seeming to stitch its way into the book, stitching the words and images and subject matter together into an all encompassing net of language.

Net Needle contains 42 poems, beginning with 'Listening to Cuckoos' and ending with 'The Kingfisher's Soul'. 'Listening to Cuckoos' begins with 'Two unchanging notes; to us, words.../ downward-ending notes that pour through a falling of night / coming over the distances, words that don't change'. It is the first day of spring, a season of growth and blossoming, but the poem implies constancy. Toward the end of the poem, the storm birds also call 'two notes, two words' at twilight and they are still there at dawn, cackling 'in the broken-egged dawn, in the echoing light'. All we learn of the words is that they are 'not exactly a self – not quite' (1) and the reader may find him or

[1] Jonathan Shaw. Review of *The Kingfisher's Soul* (Bloodaxe, 2009) https://shawjonathan.wordpress.com/2011/09/01/adamsons-kingfishers-soul/.

herself longing to know what those words are that don't change. Perhaps those words are 'not quite' and the poem might signifiy the beginning of a transformation, of becoming an evolved soul – a fully realised self.

The last poem in the book, 'The Kingfisher's Soul', appears to be looking back on the transmutation of a human soul having begun anew after a 'season in hell', to here to borrow from Rimbaud. The poem opens with a wave breaking on boulders. It feels like a cathartic moment.

> A wave hits the shoreline of broken boulders,
> Explodes, fans into fine spray, a fluid wing,
> Then drops back onto the tide: a spume
>
> Of arterial blood. ... (89)

The broken boulders might represent a broken soul, while the wave is 'a fluid wing'– it fits with the bird imagery but might also be interpreted as the wing of an angel. The action of the wave hitting the boulder is powerful, stunning and if you've ever been so close to a wave breaking on rocks you will know the force and impact and the refreshing shock of that fine sea spray. The 'arterial blood' is also shocking and interesting as arteries are connected to the heart and a cut artery will spurt blood with great force every time the heart beats. As a metaphor for the journey of a soul it seems to signify a critical turning point – a wakeup call perhaps. This is not the place for further literary analysis so I will simply say that it seems a well-chosen poem to end the collection with, if a large number of the poems in between are considered as moments along the way in the journey of a soul that ends by stepping into the peace and promise of the future.

In between these two fine poems are a number of poems featuring birds, the river, fishermen and childhood memories, as well as poems about or after other poets such as Dorothy Wordsworth, Randolph Stow, Michael Dransfield, Francis Webb and William Blake, to name a handful. 'Via Negativa, The Divine Dark', which won the Blake Poetry Prize in 2011, is included and poses the question, 'What form, shape, or song / might represent a soul?' (12) 'The Shark-Net Seahorses of Balmoral' provides an example of clever alliteration: 'Below the scattering / school of gar, whiting cruised for worms' (30). Do you feel the movement in the scattering gar and the slowing down of the line for the cruising whiting?

'The Coriander Fields Long Bay' suggests imagination and ideas as a balm against fears and possibly as an escape from the reality of incarceration. However, the imagination isn't quite strong enough to quell those fears because it also conjures up negative ideas. One such idea is borne out by the metaphor of a cabbage moth with a lopsided wing that 'spins in circles' and leads to a suicide attempt. In another Long Bay poem, the newly formed debating society is given a topic to debate, by the Governor. The topic is, 'Is the Sydney Opera House Really Necessary?' Earlier, we see the 'I' of the poem, presumably Adamson, reading novels 'And the poetry of Percy Shelley'. When asked by the education officer what he plans to do with his future, the answer is, 'I'd tell him I wanted to be a poet', which is immediately construed as insolence. By inference, then, the Opera House topic is clearly an exercise in attacking and defending the Arts.

Many of the poems are set by the Hawkesbury River where Adamson lives. The scenery is ever changing and never tiresome. Many of the events and encounters in these poems begin with something quite ordinary but the ordinary is often transformed into something extraordinary, sublime even. In the prose poem, 'A Proper Burial', an encounter from the previous Christmas is recalled when, 'The other night outside our house an owlet nightjar swooped down onto the road after a

moth'. The recalled encounter begins when the poet goes out to buy milk on Christmas Day and notices an injured bird on the road. He pulls the car over and goes back to discover a tawny frogmouth that had been run over and carries it off to the side of the road – quite an ordinary occurrence especially for one attuned to nature and birds. However, the encounter becomes extraordinary when a young Aboriginal girl in a white dress appears nearby and he discovers that there were actually two birds killed – one had swooped down 'trying to help somehow' and was also run over (71). The poet is left shaken and the experience never leaves his mind. I have only sketched out the poem here so as not to spoil it for the reader.

Debra Zott

Note: the reviewer made use of the US edition, published by Flood Editions. The Australian edition is published by Black Inc.